

The Washington National Cathedral: A Place to Gather Together

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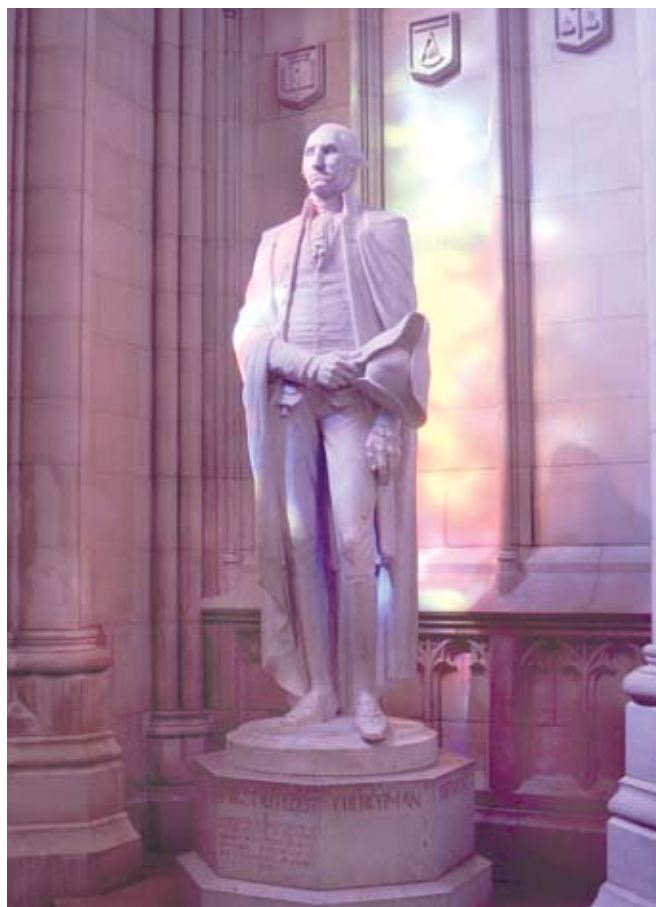
Washington, D.C. is a city widely recognized for its monuments, memorials, and landmarks. Visitors are routinely drawn to the great sites that mark our nation's history such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Arlington National Cemetery, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Washington Memorial, among others. One site that is often overlooked is the Washington National Cathedral. From its home atop Mt. St. Alban (a hill in the city's northwestern quadrant), the cathedral (also known as the Cathedral Church of Saint Peter and Saint Paul) towers in elevation above the rest of the city, even the Washington Monument. The cathedral is certainly worth a visit when visiting Washington, D.C. for its beauty and for its contribution to U.S. history.

A Balanced Beginning

Thomas Jefferson used the phrase “the separation of church and state” in a letter to a Baptist congregation in Danbury, Connecticut in January 1802. That phrase has become a part of our national identity. While the United States does not have a state sponsored religion (which is forbidden by the First Amendment to the Constitution), religion and faith have played an important role in the history and development of our nation.

The idea for a house of worship to represent the nation can be traced back to a story about George Washington in 1791.¹ Our first president commissioned Major Pierre L'Enfant, a French architect and Revolutionary War veteran, to create a plan for the nation's capitol. It was L'Enfant who first imagined “a great church for national purposes,” and he included the church in his plans for the city, but public sentiment was strongly against any connection between religion and the new nation, and the idea was dismissed. A little more than one hundred years later, on January 6, 1893, a cathedral foundation was finally established by an act of Congress, and President Benjamin Harrison signed the charter (incorporation papers). This act signaled a change in public thought and served as the beginning of the cathedral.

The first Episcopal bishop of Washington, Henry Yates Satterlee, soon began to raise money and search for suitable land for the cathedral. He secured a 57-acre site atop Mt. St.



George Washington statue at the National Cathedral

Alban and began to assemble a team to help him build a Gothic style cathedral like those that had graced many of Europe's most notable cities since the Middle Ages. Satterlee had strong opinions about the architecture of the building as well as its purpose. He stated that the cathedral should be known as a “House of Worship for all People”, a guiding principle of the cathedral that continues today. Specifically, his design was for a “spiritual home to which men of every class, rich and poor, statesman, tradesman and laborer, may come without money and without price, with the consciousness that it is their common Father's house.”²



West side of the cathedral at night.

Corner Stone

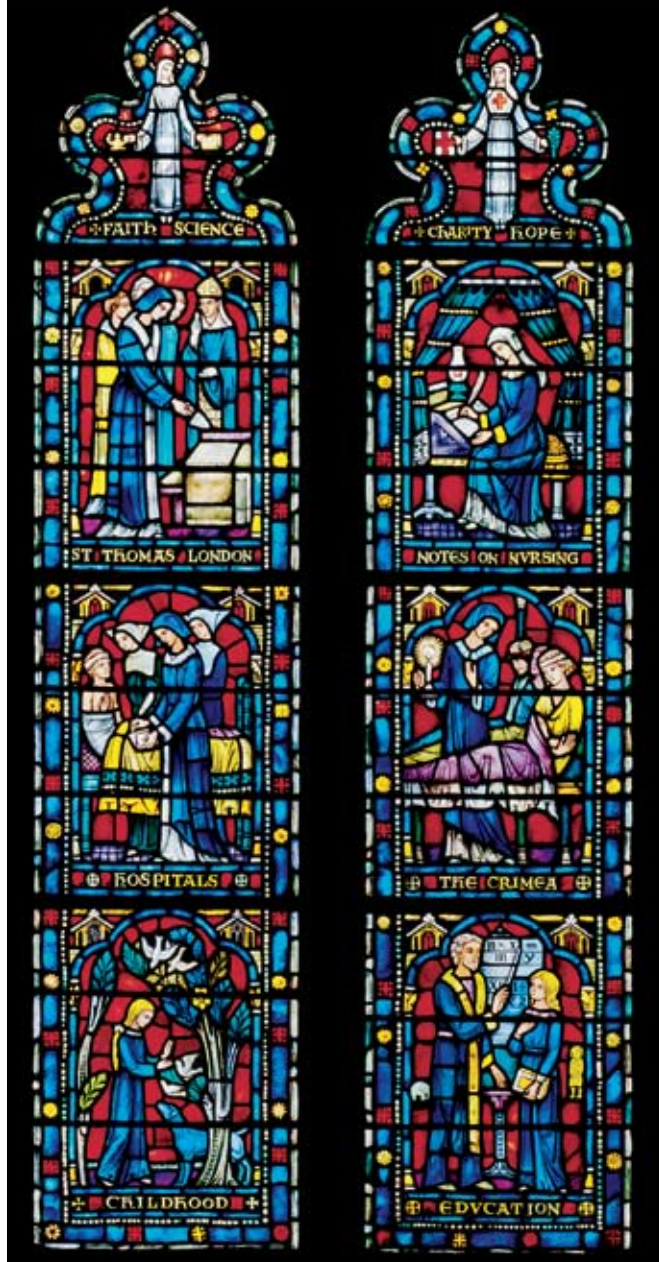
In the autumn of 1907, construction finally began. On September 29th, an estimated crowd of 20,000 gathered to watch the dedication of the foundation stone, which came from a field near Bethlehem and was set into a larger stone of American granite, and to listen to President Theodore Roosevelt deliver the dedication address. The construction of the cathedral slowed and even stopped briefly during difficult times in our nation's history such as the Great Depression and both World Wars, but

always resumed as conditions improved. The last section, the West Tower, was finally completed on September 29, 1990, 83 years exactly from the beginning of the project. This was a remarkable feat because many cathedrals built in Europe took several hundred years to complete. President George H. W. Bush gave the dedication speech that day as thousands of proud Americans gathered to see the completed cathedral.

Another notable aspect of the cathedral's construction involves financing. Although the cathedral is affiliated with the Episcopal

FACTS AND FIGURES

- The Washington National Cathedral is the sixth largest cathedral in the world and second largest in the United States (behind St. John the Divine in New York City)
- The Gloria in Excelsis Tower is more than 300 feet tall and is the highest point in Washington, D.C.
- The cathedral contains more than 200 stained glass windows and 110 gargoyles
- The heaviest stone used in construction weighs 11,000 pounds
- A first edition (1611 C.E.) of the *King James Bible* is held by the cathedral in the rare book library.



Stained glass windows detailing the life and service of nurse Florence Nightingale

faith, no church or government money has ever been used to build or maintain the cathedral. It was constructed entirely from donations from the American public and our friends around the world.

History in Stone and Glass

Although the cathedral is slightly 100 years old, it has been the setting for some significant moments in American history. Also, within its walls are tributes to those who contributed to our nation's heritage. In the George Washington bay, a statue of Washington, made of white Vermont marble stands ten feet high. The pedestal reads, "First Citizen-Churchman- President-Statesman-Farmer-Soldier-Patriot-Free Mason." Lee Lawrie, the sculptor, said, "I have tried to show not the soldier, not the president, but the man Washington, coming into Christ Church, Alexandria, pausing a moment before going down the aisle to his pew."³

The cathedral also contains a statue of Reverend Robert Hunt who held the first Anglican service in the new world as well as a brick from the church built at Jamestown in 1607. Other famous Americans are honored in stained glass windows, including the explorers Lewis and Clark and Southern generals Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. One window commemorates the Apollo 11 mission and features a slice of a moon rock collected by astronauts Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Michael Collins, a former student of the St. Albans School on the cathedral grounds. In the St. Johns Chapel, notable Americans are remembered in needle-point. The pads used to comfort knees while worshipping, called kneelers, depict many eminent Americans including Alexander Graham Bell and his telephone, Robert Fulton and the steamboat, author Herman Melville, and President John F. Kennedy.

Historical Events

The pulpit of the cathedral has been used to illuminate some of the social issues of various eras. During the 1950s the dean of the cathedral, Francis Sayre Jr., denounced Senator Joseph McCarthy for his unsubstantiated claims of Communist sympathizers. The following decade, Sayre and three more clergy participated in civil rights marches in Selma, Alabama (in March, 1965) and later used the pulpit to share their views regarding justice and freedom for all Americans, regardless of color. Later in that turbulent decade, on March 31, 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. preached a sermon at the cathedral, a message pleading for America to put aside racial hostilities and become a brotherhood. At one point in his address, he described the eleven o'clock hour of Sunday morning, when many Americans were worshipping, as "the most segregated hour of America."⁴ It would be his last sermon. He was assassinated four days later in Memphis.

A Place for Mourning and Remembrance

In addition to documenting America's history, the cathedral has also been used as a place to gather in to honor the lives of famous Americans. President Woodrow Wilson is buried in the

cathedral, and surrounding his sarcophagus are excerpts from his most notable speeches and symbols from his life of service. In 1969, world leaders gathered there for the funeral of the D-Day commander, President Dwight Eisenhower. Memorial services were also held for Presidents Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford. During November 10–14, 1982 more than 57,000 names were read aloud of either dead or missing Americans as part of the Vietnam War Vigil and Memorial Service. More recently, the cathedral has hosted services after national tragedies such as the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001; the devastation of the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina in 2005; and the shootings at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) in 2007.

Conclusion

Bishop Satterlee’s vision has been realized; the cathedral is truly a place for all Americans to gather, whether they follow a spiritual tradition or none at all. Since its construction, the cathedral has been a symbol of inclusiveness, tolerance, and respect for individual rights. In 2004, then-Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, speaking at President Reagan’s funeral service, captured this spirit when she quoted a passage from John Winthrop’s sermon delivered in 1630,

Now the only way ... to provide for our prosperity is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. ... We must delight in each other; make others’ condition our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body ...⁵

A visit to the metropolitan Washington, D.C. area should include a stop at this site, where more than 1,500 services are held by various organizations and religions each year. A visit offers opportunities to not only learn about some notable Americans, but to see a beautiful example of Gothic architecture usually reserved for ancient European cities. 🏰

Notes

1. Nancy S. Montgomery, *Guide to Washington Cathedral* (Stamford, CT: Garamond/Pridemark, 1985), 7.
2. Montgomery.
3. Montgomery.
4. The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University, mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/kingpapers/article/remaining_aware_through_a_great_revolution/.
5. Washington National Cathedral, *Living Stones: Washington National Cathedral at 100* (Cheverly, MD: Peake DeLancey, 2007), 79-82.

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Darth Vader at the Cathedral?



During the 1980s, *Geographic World* magazine for children sponsored a competition where children were invited to design sculpture to be included on the west tower of the Washington National Cathedral. Several designs were selected to be included as grotesques on the tower. Grotesques are decorative sculptures that can take human, animal, or plant forms and are known for their exaggerated and distorted features. These decorative architectural elements are also functional, being part of a drainage system that diverts rain water from the roof. The winning designs of the contest included a raccoon; a girl with pigtails; a man with large teeth and an umbrella; and Darth Vader, the villain from *Star Wars*. If you visit the cathedral, you can find Darth Vader high on the northwest corner of the west tower.



The Space Window—featuring a slice of a moon rock